

“Joseph – The Peacemaker”

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Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

In this morning's Torah portion, we are able to glimpse the emotional scene as Joseph finally reveals his true identity to his brothers. Not only does he share with them his conviction that this unbelievable rise to power in Egypt is nothing less than divine will, but he also cautions them not to be quarrelsome among themselves.

God ordered all things for good, despite his brothers' evil intentions. Human malevolence doesn't stand a chance when pitted against the divine plan for human destiny.

So Joseph loads his brothers up with all sorts of riches from Egypt and orders them to return with their families so that they'll be able to settle there and survive through the five years of famine that remain.

Once again, in the midst of his brothers' newfound wealth and security, Joseph underscores one fact: "Do not be quarrelsome along the way." Now what did Joseph have in mind there? And why, especially, in the middle of this joyous and totally unexpected reunion, would he caution the brothers against being quarrelsome?

The twelfth century French commentator Rashi interprets it this way: on their way home to get their father Jacob and their households, and to pack up for the trip back to Egypt, perhaps each of the brothers would place blame upon one another for having sold Joseph into slavery all those years before. But Joseph, understanding how guilt and denial operate, anticipates his brothers' need to blame each other, and therefore instructs them not to engage in recriminations inspired by a sense of guilt over their past misdeeds toward him. In effect, Joseph is telling his brothers that the chances are that they may well never agree about what happened in the past, or the role that each played or their individual culpability, but that they can still live in harmony in the present despite their disagreement over the events of the past.

I would like to suggest that Joseph's advice to his brothers is no less critical for us today than it was for them way back in Biblical antiquity. Conflicts within families are often magnified by our tendency to remember the past in a way that flatters ourselves and gets us off the moral hook. For instance, two loving relatives end up disagreeing not only about the meaning about what happened in the past, but cannot even agree as to the chronology of events.

We're talking human nature here! And by focusing on those areas of disagreement, what happens is that we lose sight of that opportunity to be part of each other's lives in the present and the future. Joseph's advice still rings true – in such times, when we have family disagreements – arguments which threaten to tear us apart and permanently distance us from one another – it may very well be smarter to simply agree to disagree about the past and start afresh in the present.

What does that mean for us here in New Orleans, post-Katrina? We are "a family" – that is, the citizens of New Orleans are a family and our destiny and well-being are profoundly interrelated. We have learned that, have we not? A city cannot operate with "only chiefs and no Indians!" We sit in our finest restaurants, which have managed to open on a limited basis with limited menus, eating on paper plates with plastic utensils, because –

why? – the “Indians” have yet to arrive and there’s no one to wash the dishes. We are a perfect example of the interdependence of the human family.

From the mayor and governor and senators and city council members on down, we have long passed the point where a cessation on assigning blame for failures of direction and leadership will avail us in the present and future. Let distinguished and knowledgeable authorities among our citizenry study the mistakes of the past and publish their findings. That will be all to the public’s benefit. But we need to work together now, toward the resolution of our pressing problems, in a trusting and rancor-less environment. No good can come from thousands of empty trailers because there is no one to approve the connection of electricity and plumbing. The emergency of today, and I don’t think it takes a genius to understand this, precludes the blame game over what took place yesterday! And so Joseph was right in advising his brothers, “Do not be quarrelsome along the way.” Stop worrying about who was most guilty in betraying me and sending me down here to Egypt. The fact remains, that you have other business that urgently demands your attention to safeguard and to protect life in the present.

As we journey together anticipating our present and future, we do well to remember Joseph’s advise: “Do not be quarrelsome along the way.” Surely, my friends, there is enough for us to do as plan together for tomorrow.

Amen